

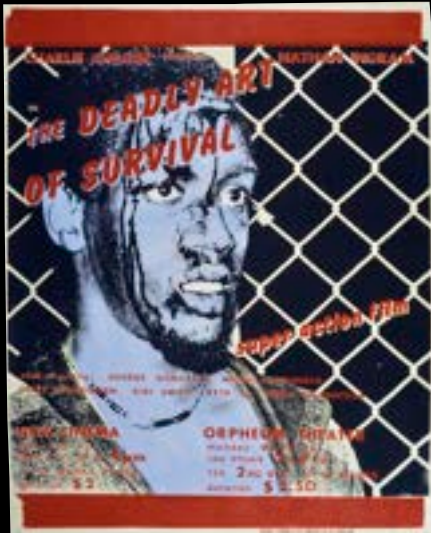


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For *Wild Style* director and New York visual artist **Charlie Ahearn**, documenting hip-hop culture's early days has been the project of a lifetime.

BY ANDY THOMAS



In 1978, eighteen-year-old graffiti writer and budding neighborhood folk hero Lee Quiñones painted his now-iconic *Howard the Duck* mural on a handball court wall outside Junior High School 56 on New York's Lower East Side.

That same year, while shooting kung fu movie *The Deadly Art of Survival* in the area, Charlie Ahearn pointed his Super 8 camera at the mural for what would become that film's opening tracking shot. Two years after spotting the *Howard the Duck* mural—and a fleeting run-in with the elusive Quiñones that further piqued his curiosity—Ahearn would cast the young artist as the semi-autobiographical lead, Zoro, in hip-hop's first and most influential film: *Wild Style*.

Ahearn himself had arrived in New York City from upstate Binghamton in 1973 to attend the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program, falling in with a new breed of guerrilla filmmakers then beginning to populate the city's downtown arts scene. Creating DIY films on cheap 16mm Bolex and Super 8 cameras and screening them inside nightclubs, neighborhood community centers, and other non-traditional venues, Ahearn and no-wave cinema peers like Amos Poe and Vivienne Dick used the gritty streets of New York as their canvas, and the people who inhabited them as their stars.

The seeds of *Wild Style* itself were planted in June 1980, when Ahearn and his cohorts in Collaborative Projects (a.k.a. Colab)—the arts activist collective that also included his twin brother, John Ahearn, and wife, Jane Dickson—transformed an abandoned massage parlor at West 41st Street and Seventh Avenue into the wildly influential *The Times Square Show*.

Hailed by the *Village Voice* as the “first radical art show of the '80s,” *Times Square* proved to be a watershed moment for graffiti art, with Lee Quiñones and Fred “Fab 5 Freddy” Braithwaite—who had first worked together as members of the Fabulous 5ive writers crew—featured alongside the likes of Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Keith Haring. Of the many connections made during the show's thirty-day run, among the most notable was the one between Ahearn

and Braithwaite, who had been asking about the filmmaker after catching a screening of *The Deadly Art of Survival*.

It was then that Braithwaite—deeply immersed in early hip-hop culture, with his finger on the pulse of both the downtown and South Bronx scenes—floated to Ahearn the idea of making a film that would capture the full breadth of this nascent phenomenon.

The first feature film to document the four elements of hip-hop—graffiti, breakdancing, MCing, and DJing—*Wild Style* was shot predominantly in the Bronx, with appearances by Busy Bee, the Cold Crush Brothers, the Rock Steady Crew, and Grandmaster Flash, among other pioneers. Mixing narrative drama and documentary performance footage of these burgeoning icons, it was a portal into this nascent culture seen and embraced by young people across the world. For both its creator, Ahearn, and protagonist, Quiñones, *Wild Style* became a foundational work, one which they have continued to revisit through new projects over the years.

The two reunited once more this past fall in London, where each was the subject of separate solo shows at the Woodbury House gallery in Mayfair, with Ahearn presenting collages and paintings based primarily on photos he took while making *Wild Style* in the early '80s. The twin exhibitions coincided with the release of a new 4K restoration of the film's original 16mm print. Brilliantly packaged on Blu-ray and 4K UHD by Arrow Films, the edition includes brand-new commentary and interviews along with previously unseen footage, bringing fresh insights to one of the twentieth century's most influential cultural documents.

Following the opening of the *Wild Style* exhibition, where Ahearn was joined by Quiñones and a cast of creators whose lives were changed by the film, Wax Poetics visited the director at Woodbury House for a conversation about his artistic practice. As he toured the exhibition and regaled us with the stories behind the images on display around him, he exuded the same zealous enthusiasm that drove him to make *Wild Style* five decades earlier.





In the context of this exhibition and the art on the walls here today, I was wondering: Had you always been a painter?

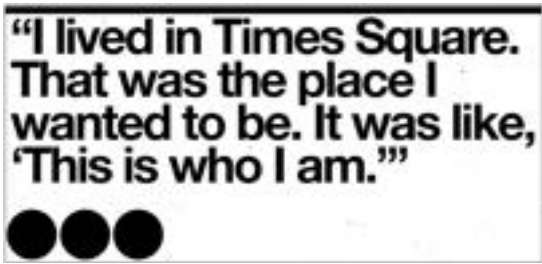
Charlie Ahearn: The answer to that is I had always been an artist. I came to New York with the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program in 1973, and did these conceptual murals. I wouldn’t have made a painting back then like those in this exhibition. The art world in New York at that time was highly conceptual; painting was not really done. Artists were more interested in ways of thinking about art rather than actually doing it.

At the time, what was your thinking about what art should be for?

There was a sense amongst the people that I hung out with that to be “street” was to be there and important. Anything art world-related was square, for squares. For us, it wasn’t discussions about art concepts that mattered; it was about getting your hands dirty. So, for example, *The Times Square Show* from June 1980 was organized by a group I was involved in called Colab. We were doggedly trying to work more collectively.

The Times Square Show became something of a milestone for graffiti art. Can you tell me a bit more about it?

It was an exhibition held on three stories in Times Square. Nobody had thought of making an art exhibition out of Times Square. That was a place known for drug dealers, prostitutes, and peep shows. There was no art in Times Square. It was also a place for martial arts movies, so I was there all the time. I lived in Times Square for two years before the show, so that was the place I wanted to be. It was like, “This is who I am.” The whole point of the show was going against the grain of what was expected, in every way possible.



Moving on to your filmmaking, I wanted to go back before *Wild Style* to *The Deadly Art of Survival*. How did that movie come to be made?

At the time, I was going into communities and shooting things with my Bolex camera, and then showing the movies there. One time, these twelve young people come into the room—all around thirteen to fifteen years old—and take a seat. I was like, “Who are these

people?” It turns out they are all martial arts kids. The leader of the group—who was all of seventeen years old, and their instructor—says, “We really like what you are doing. We want you to make a film with us.” Now, I wasn’t the same filmmaker I was a year ago when I made these movies they are watching, because, by now, I had discovered Super 8. So the idea was to make a “kung fu movie” on Super 8, reflecting everything going on in these kids’ community, and creating a narrative fantasy around it.

How did that narrative evolve?

These guys would do live shows in the community that would feature their martial arts but also tell stories similar to martial arts films of the day. As I’m watching these shows, I’m thinking, “OK, there’s a scene right there,” so I’m really cribbing everything they are doing. We only met on Saturdays at 10 a.m. because they are still at school. Every Saturday, I would buy them pizza and put it on the park bench. That way, people are gonna stick around. It’s going to attract people. I’m saying this to illustrate how DIY this all was. There was no exchange of money during the entire production of *The Deadly Art of Survival*. Now, this is Lee Quiñones’s neighborhood, and I have his murals in that movie. *The Deadly Art of Survival* starts with *Howard the Duck* as the opening pan shot right at the start of the movie.

Lee was a bit of an elusive figure back then, for obvious reasons. How did you come to work with him?

So I was there in 1978 seeing that first mural on the Lower East Side, and filming it on my Super 8 and becoming fascinated by [the idea of] who created it. This young teenager came along with a big afro and saw that I was filming something around his mural. I said, “I really want to work with you. How do I get in touch?” He was on this scooter, and he said, “I’ll be around,” before tearing off, and he’s gone. Two years go by. I have no idea where he lives. I know he’s in the Lower East Side somewhere, but I have no idea where his house is. I have always wondered what would have happened if I had met him then. What kind of film would we have made? Talking to him since, I discovered he was obsessed with movies and had always wanted to get into making them. But, back then, he showed none of this interest to me.

Was Lee just being cool and young?

No, he thought the world was trying to capture him. He didn’t think I was a cop or anything, but he was generally gun-shy of anyone who takes interest in him. Because, to him, that is what cops do.

Fab 5 Freddy became an essential figure in the making of *Wild Style*. I believe you met him for the first time at *The Times Square Show*.

The painting right here [See page 86—*Ed.*] shows that first meeting.

He had been asking around [about] how he could meet this Charlie Ahearn. He comes up to me and says he would like to talk to me about the idea for a movie. This would involve what was happening on the subways with all the graffiti, combined with what was happening on the street that would come to be known as hip-hop.

That’s an important point because, at the time, the two things weren’t connected in the public’s eye, were they?

Not at all. Nobody saw any relationship between what was happening on the subways in Manhattan with the MCs and block parties in the Bronx. The stuff on the subways had been everywhere for a number of years. We lived with it as New Yorkers. It was on all the trains. But, to experience hip-hop at that time, you had to go to the Bronx—that is where that was happening. And Fab 5 Freddy was connected to all of that. I knew that he’d been working with Lee Quiñones on various projects. They had done the exhibition [at Galleria La Medusa] in Rome in 1979. So I told Fab 5 Freddy, “If you can bring Lee Quiñones here tomorrow morning at 11 a.m., I will bring some bank—like say fifty dollars—and you guys can get some spray paint and make a piece on the wall outside the building.” That was my vision of the future—not making this movie that would become a huge success. My thing was: I have been trying to get my grip on this guy Lee Quiñones for two years.

So, finally, this was your moment.

Sure enough, at 11 a.m., Freddy turns up with Lee Quiñones. I had the money—two twenties and a ten. Enough to get some spray paint. So here in the painting is Lee Quiñones and Fab 5 Freddy creating this work on the wall outside of the Times Square building. I took one photograph when they were making this piece, and this painting at this exhibition is a representation of that pivotal moment.

How did things develop from that into the making of *Wild Style*?

Well, now my mind is starting to work. So this movie is going to be about Lee rather than just this idea of Freddy’s about subway art and hip-hop. I wanted the film to be about this iconic graffiti artist who is painting on trains illegally and has to be secretive because nobody is supposed to know who he is, as he’s the most wanted graffiti artist in New York. The police are after him. So Lee was to be the main character but, rather than set the film on the Lower East Side, I chose to base most of it in the Bronx. At that time, the South Bronx really was the poorest and roughest “don’t go there” place.

But you did go there.

My twin brother, John, lived there and was making portrait casts of people in the Bronx at the time. I was also up there shooting things and showing *The Deadly Art of Survival*. It was considered the

roughest, worst place to go, so we gravitated as a matter of course to that. Times Square was great, but going to the Bronx was even greater. At the time, three artist friends of Colab [Stephen Eins, Joe Lewis, and William Scott] had started this arts space in 1978 called Fashion Moda.

That was a bold move back then. Could you tell me a little bit about Fashion Moda?

It was on 149th Street and Third Avenue, right in the middle of the shit. It was a big space, and my brother’s show, *South Bronx Hall of Fame*, that had been featured on the cover of the *Village Voice*, had been held there. My wife, Jane Dickson, had also done this show called *City Maze*. It was this maze made out of cardboard packaging from sofas or refrigerators that had been dumped into the Bronx. She went in a truck, found all this cardboard, and brought it back to Fashion Moda and created this maze with all these passages all over the place, and had graffiti artists make paintings on the walls. Fashion Moda really became a magnet for graffiti artists and local kids as soon as school was out. That was the whole idea of radical art to us—to transform people’s lives, not make objects of great value for some collector. And *The Times Square Show* had the same kind of vibe.

There are some iconic Bronx places featured in *Wild Style*, including the Dixie.

That was a great place where Grandmaster Flash would perform. It was right in the neighborhood of Rodney C [of Funky Four Plus One and Double Trouble]. I used that neighborhood a lot because I had people like Rodney C—and many others—who had helped me establish trust in the neighborhood. So we could work there and do all those famous scenes. All those in the film were neighborhood kids, and they knew who I was. Or at least they knew who Rodney was. I never went to places where I didn’t belong. I was always a guest of people who liked and trusted me. I was very careful about that. I was always with people, never wandering around on my own.

What were the first hip-hop events you went to in the Bronx?

[At] the first major hip-hop event I went to, Busy Bee is there by the stage with this lit joint. He looks at me, and he’s like, “Holy shit, it’s the cops.” And he goes, “What’s up, man?” So I tell him I’m doing a movie about hip-hop. He puts his arm around me and leads me across the stage to where the mic is. He then goes, “This here is my film producer—we’re making a movie about the rap scene.” That is [how] he became a centerpiece of the movie. Because once that happens, the doors are wide open: I’m with Busy Bee, and everyone knows who Busy Bee is. And that goes back to what I was saying about trust. Once that happened, I’m approached by many people in the audience. And everyone there is a hip-hop person. They all have flyers and they all want me to go to their parties. The flyers [are] how I moved into the Bronx.



(opposite top) Grand Master Caz, with extra-large glasses, filming the *Wild Style* "Basketball Throwdown" scene in 1981. Photo by Charlie Ahearn.
 (opposite bottom) Chris Stein of Blondie, Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers of Chic, Grandmaster Flash, and Fab 5 Freddy in 1981. Photo by Charlie Ahearn.
 (above) "The World of Hip-Hop Circa 1979," Charlie Ahearn's hand-drawn map depicting hip-hop landmarks in New York City.
 (following spread) Paintings featured in Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style* exhibition at Woodbury House.





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I'm fascinated by this new painting you've done with all the flyers.

This is a painting based on a photograph I took in 1980 of Dot-A-Rock from the Fantastic Five, one of the MCs featured in *Wild Style*. He invited me over to his place. He was living with his parents, like everybody of his age was in the Bronx at that time. Nobody had their own apartments. So this is in Dot-A-Rock's bedroom, there is his alarm clock. He wanted to show off his flyer collection. And I was obsessed with these flyers. Each one was like a magazine—it had all the information you needed. The same group of people who started hip-hop are all on his wall.

Tell me about the process of making this work.

I took one picture of Dot-A-Rock in his bedroom, and it's a fucking bad picture. You can't even make out the flyers very well. As I started to enlarge them, they became more and more out of focus. I was very frustrated, as I knew this piece was the key to my painting work. I was talking to two friends of mine, Sureshot [La Rock] and Pete Nice [of 3rd Bass]—as well as being an MC, [Pete] is a huge flyer collector. So I told him my idea of making this into a large version, and I wanted to get all the original flyers. So he gave me his collection, as did Sureshot. I added them to my collection, and we recreated Dot-A-Rock's wall. I discovered I could blow up the photo of Dot-A-Rock, and it lost none of its power. So then I drew each of the flyers with pencil and painted them. I didn't want the colors to be totally authentic. The flyers used to be in these bright colors, but I really exaggerated it. The work was so big it had to be created on five separate silkscreen sections painted in advance, laid out on a table, then joined together.

Another painting is of Patti Astor, who is sadly no longer with us. I've always been interested in how she came to be involved in *Wild Style*.

I was at this wild hip-hop event in this gigantic hall in Harlem, and I saw Patti and a friend there and took some pictures of her. Then there was a gunshot somewhere in the space. Can you imagine thousands of kids in this place, and a gunshot goes off? Everyone is running in all directions, scared. By the exit, Patti was there and I was like, "God, that was amazing." From there, we went to a bar, and she knew I was making a movie. I was like, "There might be a part for you in this movie—you could play a part like what's just happened." That became her character in the movie, based on who she actually was.

I wanted to talk about some of the other recent works based on old photographs, where you're scratching into the film.

Many of the old photographs I took were done with a flash and were too dark. You have to remember, back then, we used slides to keep pictures—you didn't make copies. But, although they were too dark, instead of throwing away the slide, I took a screwdriver to scratch into it. This one was Grand Wizzard Theodore, so I wrote "scratch" across the top because he was the inventor of the scratch. There's another, of Futura. I went to visit him in his studio, which was called Soul Artists. When I arrived there, I was getting my camera ready, I'm walking into the room, and he approaches with this handstand flip without telling me. He does that as a way to say hello, and I take a flash of it. But when it comes back, it's too dark. So I scratch into it the words "Futura" to bring something else to it.

So the darkness actually brings something to the piece?

Even more than the darkness, the fuck-up became something. The mistake becomes the point. That is the cornerstone of the new slide show in this exhibition. This goes back to when I started doing slide shows at the Ecstasy Garage that became my playground. I would show the slide show on a carousel with Grand Wizzard Theodore scratching, or Busy Bee up onstage making rhymes of the people in the shots. They all used to call me "Charlie Video." They really didn't know what I was doing. But what I was doing was making them into stars. I was making them into famous people. ●

(previous spread) The Outlaw Four at T Connection, circa 1980. Photo and scratch art by Charlie Ahearn, courtesy of Arrow Films.
(opposite) Dot-A-Rock of the Fantastic Five, posing with his flyer collection inside his Bronx bedroom. Painting by Charlie Ahearn, based on his own photograph from 1980, courtesy of Woodbury House.